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Marc Chagall, Painter of the Crucified

Cornelia Sussman

Irving Sussman

Cornelia and Irving Süssman

MARC CHAGALL, PAINTER OF THE CRUCIFIED

IN 1947 Marc Chagall painted a picture called *Self-Portrait with a Clock.* The clock is centered at the top of the painting like the dove in certain Renaissance paintings of the Blessed Virgin. If one looks at it from a little way, it is indeed the shape of a bird, with the curved body of a bird in half-stayed flight, and with arms raised like half-spread wings. On the face of the clock the slowly moving hands are approaching three—three o'clock is imminent, the hour of Christ's death on the cross. Beneath the clock, the painter stands in grave contemplation, his hand, with palette and brushes, dropped to his side. His head is slightly bowed and his cheek rests against the head of a sad-eyed donkey. Why are they sorrowful? They have paused before a painting of the crucifixion which occupies almost a third of the right-hand side of the canvas. The painter has stopped his work, and he and the animal, which seems to remember that once it carried the Saviour on its back, stand in a moment of melancholy suspense while the clock approaches the hour of three. In the painting which they contemplate, the crucified Christ has a *ṭallit,* a Jewish prayer shawl, wrapped around His loins.

There has surely never been a self-portrait of this kind painted by a Jew. In an interview with Raïssa Maritain, Chagall said: "Each of us constitutes a personality, it is necessary to have the daring to exteriorize it."[1]

THE LADDER

CHAGALL has a whiplike ability to sting the senses, intellect, and spirit, the body and the soul. He is a disturbing painter. Little things in his canvases, things that are not centers of interest, haunt the memory long

1. Raïssa Maritain, *Marc Chagall* (New York: Editions de la Maison Française, 1943), p. 48.

after the eye has left the picture. It is through them, these little things, that the meaning of the large center of interest is to be invaded.

Such a "little thing" is the Chagall ladder. There are ladders, many ladders. Jacob dreamed of a ladder. And a sermon attributed to St. Augustine speaks of a ladder reaching toward heaven which we build us if we but step on our vices.[2] But these are not Chagall's ladders. Or are they? Chagall's ladders resemble the other two, but his haunt and disturb as neither of the others can; perhaps because their relationship to the scenes in which they appear is enigmatic and requires exploration—we see Chagall's ladders in such strange places.

In an early oil called *Burning House* (1913),[3] the world is in panic fear. A house is on fire. The house is a familiar type in all the artist's paintings. It is a Vitebsk house, picturesque, love-filled, and narrow. It is, in fact, too narrow and small to hold the humanity which necessity has crowded in it. A face stares out of the window, frozen in a state of inaction. The face is too large for the window, so that the impression is one of a head, a mind, that has become detached from the body and has therefore lost the ability to make the body act. And it should act! This is a decisive moment. The house is on fire. The door is open, but the head sits facing, not escape, but some dream of escape. Outside the house a woman stands, to the rear, behind a rather fluid stone wall that seems to grow out of the very paving stones of the road. She can do nothing but cry havoc as she wards the smoke from her face with one hand and with the other tries to still the grief that wells up from the very bowels of her being. Near the front door a man is in action. He is doing something about the conflagration. He is a decisive being, but ineffectual. The small bucket of water which he carries so gracefully—each drop so precious—would have no effect in quenching the fire that threatens to consume the Vitebsk shelter. To the left a frightened horse, pulling a farmer's wagon, rears up. The sweet beast has no ears—as if it is beyond hearing what man has to say to it. It is leaping heavenward. The driver of the wagon, on his knees, seems to be imploring the heavens for help. Significantly, the horse has a collar but no reins. The horse is beyond man's control now. As a matter of fact, the animal does not even have a tail by which the man could, if he

2. St. Augustine, *Serm. Supp., de Temp. CLXXVI,* 1, 4 (PL 39:2082).

3. Another title of the same painting is *La Calèche volante* (*The Flying Carriage*).

were thinking of such a thing, guide it. Heavy smoke covers the sky. The world seems in danger of destruction. And then a disturbing detail lashes the mind and feelings of the observer. There is a ladder on the roof; a ladder that leads upward—the large rungs are at the bottom, the small at the top.

Why the ladder? One might just as well ask the question here, so near the beginning of the artist's career, as ask it later when the ladders have increased beyond subconscious unfoldings. Reasons for the ladder have, of course, been given. Chagall himself tells of an uncle who was a painter and carried a ladder around with him on the rounds of his labor. But such a homely explanation will hardly do with a Chagall. Besides, the artist himself states: "It doesn't matter to me if people discover with joy and satisfaction the enigma of my paintings in these innocent adventures of my relatives." [4] Chagall, like all great artists, knows that in his work there is an easy answer and a hard answer: if you seek the easy answer, then you will find the easy answer.

The ladder in *Burning House* recalls a ladder in an earlier painting, one done in 1909 when Chagall was barely twenty and before he went to Paris. It is called *The Funeral.* Of this canvas, Isaac Kloomok says: "The composition is primitive in style. The perspective is primitive. The buildings are in the upper part of the canvas, the funeral procession in the lower part. Both, the row of houses and the procession, go parallel to each other and to the surface plane of the canvas. All the figures are flat, almost two-dimensional. It looks as if the whole procession were made of cardboard and pasted on." [5]

Here the artist has painted a wintry scene. Snow covers the street. It is evening. In the upper level to the left is a church with a cross on it. The cupola of the church is broken. The cross is falling down. Birds are flying about. In the foreground, on a lower level, the funeral procession goes by. There are six figures in it, including a little horse. The funeral procession is hurrying. There is a great urgency about getting the corpse buried. The seventh figure, which is the corpse, lies in the black wagon, his dead white face only discernible. A dog follows the procession through the snow. Unexpectedly, there is a ladder in the

4. Chagall, *Ma vie* (Paris: Stock, 1931); as quoted by James Johnson Sweeney, *Marc Chagall* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946), p. 8.

5. Isaac Kloomok, *Marc Chagall, His Life and Work* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), p. 18.

painting, bridging the lower to the upper level of the canvas. It stands against a lamp post. The lamplighter is lighting the street lamp.

The detail of the ladder is no mere psychological accident. The significance is too obvious: it must be religious. But years later, when the religious meaning of Chagall's paintings had reached the pens of the art critics (importantly enough, after he had studied the paintings of Giotto and El Greco in the middle thirties), he denied any religious intent: "I am not, and never have been, religious." [6]

Lionello Venturi, however, less fearful than many a writer on Chagall, weighs his denial of religious intent: "The answer, perhaps, was given by Jacques Maritain in 1929: 'Chagall knows what he says; he does not, perhaps, know the range of what he says. That St. Francis would have taught him, as he taught it to the larks.' And in 1938 W. Weidlé wrote of *The Falling Angel:* 'The subject is not religious, but the art takes its very life from religion.' He meant, of course . . . that since his childhood his familiarity with a spiritual world has been such that, without knowing it, he impresses his religious feeling on everything he creates. . . . Certainly, amid the human martyrdom of today Chagall's pity is God's pity, his sorrow is God's sorrow." [7]

In painting after painting this disturbing "little thing," the ladder, appears, reaching upward—to what? It is as if the very people of these canvases were waiting for the artist to "exteriorize" *that* for which the ladder was needed. And suddenly the artist unfolds the climax, the plot. As if the curtain had risen on the final act of a play, the crucified Christ is revealed and there is the ladder leaning against the cross.

LEANING AGAINST THE CROSS

IN *Crucifixion in Yellow* (1943)—a beautiful composition which, despite the horror of man's inhumanity to man depicted there, shines with God's great love—the crucified Figure wears the head phylactery and His loins are covered with a *ṭallit;* there are the marks of the winding straps of the other phylactery still showing on the outstretched arm. The *ṭallit* is the shawl in which the pious Jew, mindful of God's awe-

6. Lionello Venturi, *Marc Chagall* (New York: Pierre Matisse Editions, 1945), p. 45.
7. *Ibid.,* pp. 45–46.

some presence, robes himself when at prayer. The phylacteries, the *tefillin,* are the small leathern boxes encasing four biblical passages; bound around head and arm, they recall that it was the Lord God, the Lord alone, who brought Israel out of Egypt, the Lord to whom every first-born belongs and who must be loved with all one's being. Because *ṭallit* and *tefillin* mark the Crucified in this painting of Chagall's, Kloomok maintains that "it is a Jew on the cross, a crucified Jew . . . his pain is Jewish, without Christian mysticism . . . the pain that all Jews carry in their hearts for their six million brothers and sisters tortured and murdered." [8]

If the One on the cross were any Jew in his torment and nothing else, if He were not Jesus crucified, the Man of pains, wounded for our rebellions, whose stripes were our healing (cf. Is 53:3, 5), the picture would be "earthbound," a conception of art which Chagall would not tolerate. Furthermore, in this period of his growth, Chagall felt that it was "necessary to change nature not only materially and from the outside, but also from within, ideologically, without fear of what is known as 'literature.'" [9] What had been but a seed in his early paintings now emerges as the full flower. His paintings reveal the universal aspect without which there can be no greatness. It is no longer a Jew, but *the Jew,* that he is painting. Or, as Raïssa Maritain has put it: "The Jews in the work of Chagall are, in the transposition and abstraction of art, an image of the imperishable Israel." [10]

Exactly, the universal and undying Jew. Chagall has not abandoned, but gone beyond, his grandfather sitting on the roof eating carrots; his uncle Noah, who plays the violin like a *schusterook,* a shoemaker; beyond everything that might possibly limit his conceptions to the immediate, to the earthbound. The limited world of Vitebsk, where he was born in 1889, was stifling to him.

Vitebsk, I am leaving you.
Stay alone with your herrings.[11]

So he wrote in 1909 when he came to the realization that Paris, the world of Jew and Christian, was the center of the world he dreamed of. When he returned from Paris to his parents' house, the smallness

8. Kloomok, *op. cit.,* p. 88.
9. Sweeney, *op. cit.,* p. 7.
10. Raïssa Maritain, *Chagall ou l'orage enchanté* (Paris: Editions des Trois Collines, 1948), p. 66.
11. Sweeney, *op. cit.,* p. 13.

of the world he once knew made him wonder how he could possibly have thought that this was the world. "When I looked down from the 'loftiness' of my present stature upon the little house where I was born, shrinking as far as I could, I asked myself how indeed could I have been born there. How could one draw his breath there?" [12]

But he was born there. He was born a second time, as it were, when he saw the world as a *universe*—when he saw Christ crucified, greater than the Jews in their grievous persecution, greater than the angel blowing the *shofar,* greater even than the Torah.

The *Crucifixion in Yellow* is a masterpiece of conceptual painting as well as a masterpiece of color, design and "space filling." Christ—a Jewish Christ, Christ the Son of her who is a daughter of Abraham—dominates the picture. He towers above everything, including the large Scroll of the Law which, very close to Him, fills the left side of the canvas. But it is not only a Jewish Christ we see here; much less is it a crucified Jew "without Christian mysticism." It is the Christ who came to redeem all mankind; His side pierced; Christ with a face like one of Giotto's Christs; above all, it is Christ with a golden halo circling His compassionate face—a Christian, medieval halo. To the right of the Christ-figure are the wandering, displaced people of the world, including the Vitebsk Jews with their loads on their backs. Beneath these figures are the burning houses. One small figure at the feet of Christ holds his hands upward. Is he afraid of what he sees? Or is he awed and thankful that Christ is there for *all,* holding the Torah which is his, the little figure's? At the bottom of the picture, seated on a royal-blue horse, is a mother with her child in her arms, the mother dressed in green and russet gold, her face a cobalt blue that is all transparence. Is it the Madonna with the Christ Child? The child is about to take the breast, to drink the milk which, in a burning, drowning, blasted world, spells hope. The mother is smiling and the child, too, is happy and strong. To the left of the picture, a fish—no longer the herring that the artist's father knew in Vitebsk—seems to be holding up a drowning woman. Behind her a ship is sinking and taking down with it a tortured figure.

In the midst of fear and destruction, the cross stands a tower of strength, and He who is fastened to it is pity and peace. A bearded, brown-capped and brown-clad Jew is placing a ladder at the foot of

12. Kloomok, *op. cit.,* p. 9.

the cross. He rises out of the burning horizon and the feeling is that he will get the ladder to rest against the crucified Christ. Despite Kloomok's interpretation that "a Jew with a ladder is close to the cross—he had come to take off his brother from the cross, but fell, himself, into the abyss of disaster," [13] there is nothing in the painting to give this impression. The Jew is not falling "into the abyss of disaster"—he is remarkably upright, almost as if he were braced, holding onto the ladder, the ladder which he knows will bridge the lower to the higher level.

In 1938, when Chagall painted his *White Crucifixion,* he put over Christ's head the legend: "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews." He wrote it in Hebrew, not forgetting, however, to add the Latin initials I.N.R.I. It is a strongly traditional Christ, even though the cloth around His loins is a Jewish prayer shawl. This was the first of the Crucifixion series. Here the ladder rests against the cross, its base standing in the burning flames without being consumed. A Vitebsk Jew is running away, out of the picture, away from the ladder. But in *Crucifixion in Yellow,* a later painting, the Jew is holding on to the ladder, placing it between the Torah and the Cross of Christ.

Then there is the *Descent from the Cross* (1947), in Kloomok's words "archaic and mystic" in mood. "Its clear, light colors—gray or ivory, with only a little blue on the wing of an angel—are related to one another with extreme rarity and delicacy," [14] says Raïssa Maritain. And as are its tones, so is the whole painting of great tenderness. The horrors of the day are only suggested in the background. In the center is the body of Christ, no longer suffering, all light. Around it moves nothing but love. A sweet burden, tenderly it is taken down, tenderly received. And there is in the painting even the loving sadness of an angel, even the compassion of a beast [15]—a whole universe of love. It is therefore barely adequate when Kloomok says that *Descent from the*

13. *Ibid.,* p. 88.

14. Raïssa Maritain, *Chagall ou l'orage enchanté,* p. 114.

15. The one who lowers the dead Christ from the cross has the head of a bird, but the body, hands, and feet of a man. To explain this strange imagery, Kloomok has recourse to the four creatures of Ezekiel; to Homeric poetry, in which the Greek gods assumed the forms of animals and birds; or to the ancient sculptures of Egypt, Assyria, and Chaldea, which represented the gods as beasts and birds (p. 88). Nothing could be further from the mark. Nor is the strange imagery, so important for the understanding of Chagall, a caricature, a disrespectful caprice, Raïssa Maritain warns us: "No, here where it is least expected, there breaks in the world of innocent beings, never absent from any of Chagall's paintings. It brings to Christ, whom men have put to death, the offering of peaceful purity. And could it not have been that there was a bird there?" (*Chagall ou l'orage enchanté,* pp. 114–115).

Cross "is not a symbol of the Jewish people's suffering, but a statement that Jesus was a Jew." [16] Once more the ladder is in its significant position. At the foot of the ladder, between Mary the Mother and Mary Magdalene, stands an old Jew, helping by holding in one hand a triple light, while with the other he reaches out to the body of the Lord.

Is it not possible that Chagall may yet be thought of as one who has set a ladder against the Cross for many to climb? Is it not possible that he will help many to see the ladder which leads from Jewish suffering to Christ's, from all men's sorrow to His, and not only to His Passion, also to His peace? Yes, there is a ladder from the earth of even modern tears to the hill of peace, and Chagall seems its painter. "Chagall is a conscious artist. While the selection and combination of his images may appear illogical from a representational viewpoint, they are carefully and rationally chosen elements for the pictorial structure he seeks to build." [17] Chagall is a conscious artist. When he uses a cross he means it to be a Christian cross, for he depicts it thus and in no other way; when he portrays Christ, he means Christ and names Him, the King of the Jews. He is a conscious artist.

In *The Yellow Christ* of the middle forties, which is not the *Crucifixion in Yellow,* the artist has painted himself seated in front of his easel. He is working on a Crucifixion which resembles the icons of the Russian villages Chagall was so fond of, a Crucifixion with the breath of simple, primitive life, a conception of Christ in which there is love, acceptance, and longing. In the moment we glimpse in the canvas, the artist has turned to watch the approach of an old, bent Jew leaning on his stick. It has been said, humorously, that Chagall is thinking here not of the picture he is painting but of the old Jew—thinking, probably, of what his old grandfather would do to him with the stick if he caught him making Christian images. But in actuality the picture states quite plainly what the artist is thinking and doing; he is painting Christ crucified, and an old Jew approaching.

THE GHETTO UNDER THE CROSS

FOR nearly two thousand years, no Jewish artist dared to paint the figure of Christ, Christ in His Passion; but suddenly, in the twentieth

16. Kloomok, *op. cit.,* p. 88.
17. Sweeney, *op. cit.,* p. 71.

century, the Cross emerges in Jewish art, most powerfully in the paintings of Marc Chagall. There is the Cross, with a ladder near-by, so that man may climb up to it, telling of man's separation from Christ and his chance of return to Him. With such intensity, drama, and magnitude is the crucifixion portrayed that one must conclude: this is the great theme of all his paintings. One becomes aware that above the little villages, above the floating lovers, above the forlorn Jews clasping the Torah, above the manger-faced beasts with violins, above the ladders, the ladders which are everywhere—there is the Cross. The longer one stays with Chagall's work, the fuller is the realization that it is all of a piece, that from beginning to end it tells one story: the ghetto under the Cross, indeed the world under the Cross, and the ladder which reveals itself as Jacob's ladder, after all.[18]

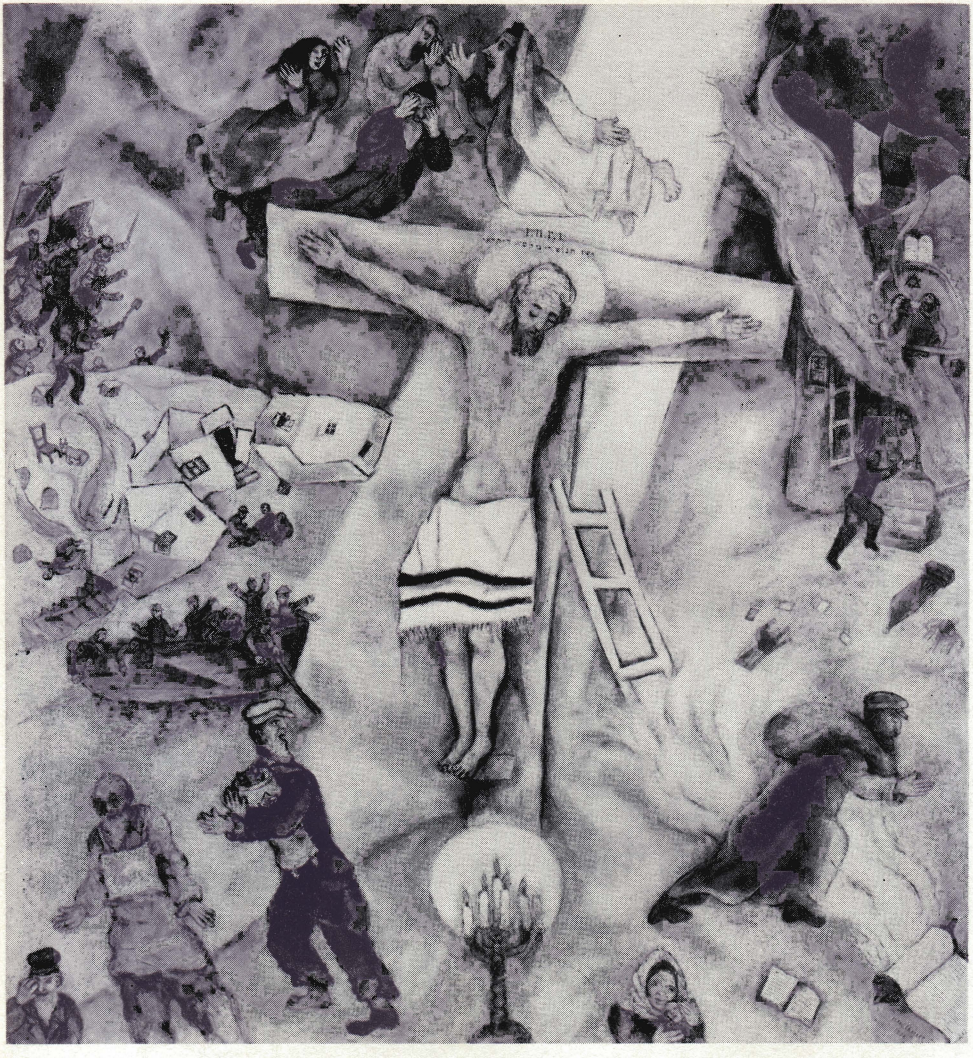
> *The ladder of Jacob, when he was sleeping*
> *in Haran—with naught but a stone for pillow—,*
> *where he dreamed the angels went up and down,*
> *that ladder was thy cross; above it speaks*
> *to us the voice of God: "I am with thee!*
> *I will keep thee and bring thee to thy land!"*
> *For thy cross is the ladder unto glory. . . .*[19]

All these centuries, the Crucified has been hanging over the ghettos with His outstretched, waiting arms, and hardly anyone has seen Him there. Now Marc Chagall has looked up and seen Him. This we feel

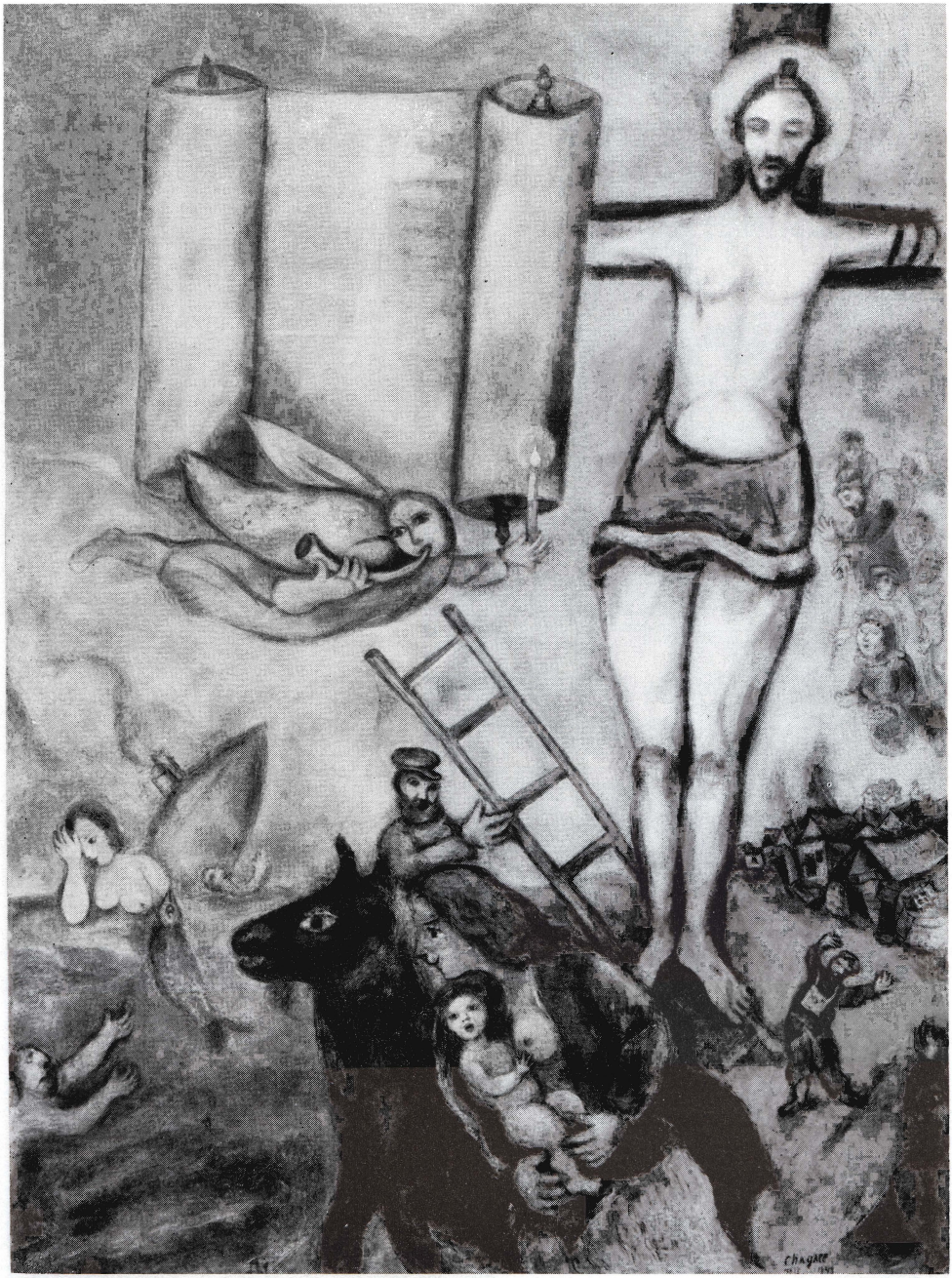
18. Henri de Lubac, S.J., in *Aspects of Buddhism* (copyright 1954 by Sheed and Ward, Inc., New York, p. 61), speaks of "the Sacred Ladder, which is obviously . . . Jacob's Ladder," and goes on to say: "This symbol was very popular in the Syrian tradition. 'Christ on the Cross,' says James of Sarugh, 'stood on the earth, as on a ladder of many rungs.' The West was not unaware of this symbol: even more significant . . . is a passage in an old Swedish missal which contains this prayer to Christ, to be said at the moment of the adoration of the Cross: 'Lead us as by a ladder to heavenly things.' And St. Catherine of Siena, in one of her visions, likewise contemplates Christ as a bridge set up between heaven and earth. Naturally, this ladder or bridge, which is Christ, stands at the center of the earth, and from earth to heaven there is no other way except through this center, for Christ on the Cross is the sole Mediator between man and God." In the notes to *Aspects of Buddhism,* p. 151, de Lubac quotes Aphraates, *Homily on Prayer* (Patr. Syr. I/1:146): "The ladder which Jacob saw is the mystery of our Saviour, by whom men ascend from the bottom towards the top; it is also the mystery of the Cross of our Saviour, which was raised like a ladder and at whose summit stood the Saviour."

19. Miguel de Unamuno, *The Christ of Velasquez,* trans. Eleanor L. Turnbull (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1951), p. 50.

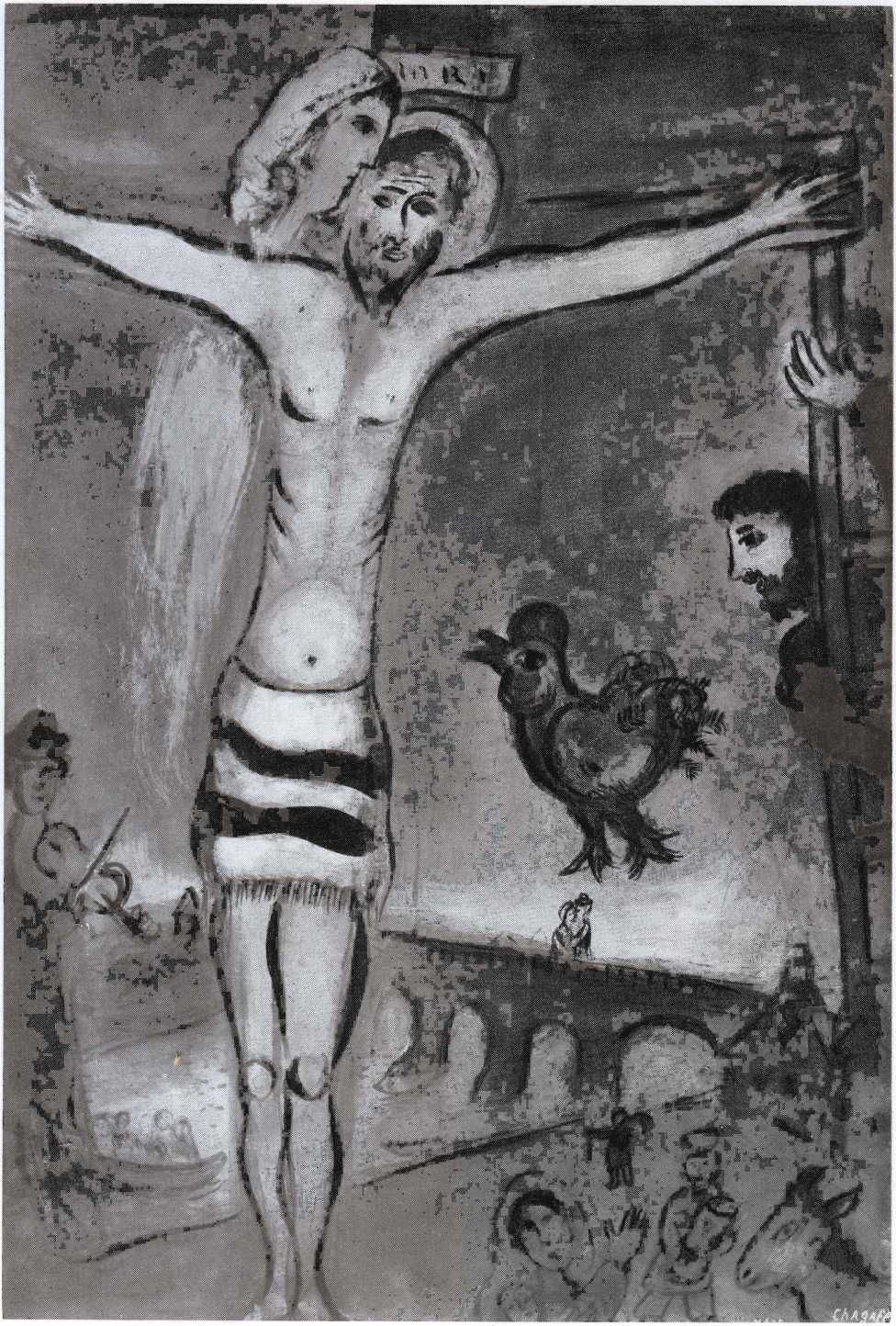
MARC CHAGALL: Self-Portrait with a Clock (1947)



MARC CHAGALL: White Crucifixion (1938)



MARC CHAGALL: Crucifixion in Yellow (1943)



MARC CHAGALL: The Crucified of the Bridge (1951)

before all his paintings, for to one who has experienced the message of the crucified Jesus which Chagall's mature work "exteriorizes," all his other work comes under this vision and speaks this message. Christ is not "contemporized" in a literary sense, not brought down to modern times—He is there at this moment, and if one looks up one will see Him; the Torah is with Him and without Him there is no Torah, and all the little people praying are with Him and without Him there is no prayer; and there is a ladder if one would but step on it.

Why does Chagall paint Christ in His crucifixion?

To the Jew, though he does not know it, Christ is always there, crucified. Chagall, who has apprehended this, has thus become the recording artist of the Jew in the diaspora, but not in the ordinary sense, rather in a deeper sense—he is the recording artist of the "Jewish subconscious" since Calvary. He has looked deep into the Jewish soul and seen Christ crucified and what he has seen he has painted. That what he has painted has turned out to be not only the "Jewish subconscious" but also the subconscious of the Christian who has lost his faith—this is what makes him the recording artist of "the Gentile in the modern diaspora." For Chagall has revealed the Crucified whose image is locked away in the closed, musty soul of modern man. Though he does not abandon Vitebsk, he goes beyond it; and his message is not for one people alone, it is for all: Christ is with us, and He is with us crucified, for we have crucified Him not only at a single moment in history, but are doing so momently, over and over again, and in a hidden way we know this.

It is this hidden knowledge modern man has of himself that makes Chagall so greatly accessible to our time, not only as a Jew whose central theme is Christ on His cross—though this in itself is strikingly significant—but above all as a man who sees that which *is*. This is how Christ is in the world of today: in white vesture as the Giver of peace, but on His cross as our Victim, on His cross where we continually put Him. The Jew Chagall can speak to the lapsed Christian about this because this "Christian" is in a state of "diaspora"—perhaps the Jew can speak to the modern Gentile about this better than any Gentile can speak to himself, because the Jew understands the state of "diaspora"; the exile is familiar territory. The exile, the "diaspora," the world of flight, so tremendously evoked by Max Picard, is today's world—and it is this that we see in Chagall's Crucifixions.

"He has painted the entire universe, and left out nothing," [20] writes Raïssa Maritain in a poem on Marc Chagall, and she continues with a poignant description of the great *White Crucifixion.* Down its center descends a great shaft of light—Raïssa Maritain calls it "a great space of ivory in a wasted world"—and in it rises the cross with Christ nailed to it; at His feet stands a lighted candelabrum with flames so firm, radiance so bright, for here is the Light that all the world's horror cannot put out. Around His loins is the Jewish prayer shawl, and about His head the glory, and over it, in Latin and in Hebrew, "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews." Below the cross, beneath His arms of compassion, there are victims of persecution: a Jew clasping the Torah, looking around desperately, not knowing where to flee; another running to save the little that is in the sack on his shoulder; a third paralyzed with fear, bearing a sign on his chest, "Ich bin Jude"; an old rabbi, his hand to his eyes; and a woman, clutching her child to her heart. On all sides ruin and havoc: the synagogue on fire, the burning houses upside down, people and chairs and books tumbling out of them, and a threatening band of assassins flourishing its banners and weapons over the village. In the sky hover figures of Jews, old and grief-stricken. Are they the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and is the woman with them Rachel the mother, "weeping for her children" (Jer 31:15)? On the water drifts an overloaded boat, with no place to go. Where can Jews go? There is no place for them on earth, no place on earth where Jews are wanted.

In the midst of this, "across the wasted world," hangs the crucified Christ, head slightly bowed, as if even through closed eyes He is looking down, watching, seeing all, on His face deathly white sorrow. One wants to move closer to Him and beg Him: Of what art thou thinking, my crucified Christ? What art thou saying to us, persecuted and persecutors, victims and slayers? All white is thy body, for thou art the

20. Raïssa Maritain, *Chagall ou l'orage enchanté,* pp. 32–33. Similarly Ph. Secretan in "Marc Chagall, Juif et Russe" (*La Vie intellectuelle,* February 1951, p. 115): "He has loved, loved everything. The little horse and the dog turned upside-down, the rooster and the juggler, the lover in the sky and the winged clock. The blue angel and the red angel, him who falls from the sky, and the woman fish. 'Then there is Christ extended across a ruined, wasted world. . . . The thoughtful rabbis and the violinists who play on their hearts in the snow.' " Having said this, Secretan asks whether Christ is not for Chagall also the One in and through whom all things hold together, the One who enshrines perfect unity, whether He is not for him "the Image of totality."

living bread hanging over a world of death and sin. What art thou saying, O Christ of our wounds? [21]

THE CLOUD OVER THE GHETTO

ALL these centuries, Christ has been hanging over the ghettos, seeing but unseen. Why did Chagall look up and see Him?

Not long ago a young Jewish scholar argued that the Jews never rejected Christ because they never encountered Him.[22] This is an astonishing, provocative contention. There is, in spite of its vast historical inaccuracy, a certain psychological truth in it. The Jews encountered Christ once at a single moment in history, encountered Him as a people, and as a people acquiesced in the rejection of Him by their leaders. From that moment in history onward, all that concerned Christ was carefully withheld from following generations, as parents withhold a painful and terrible secret from their children. Generation after generation united in an unspoken pledge of silence: the painful and terrible secret must be kept from the children. Of course "the children" were living in the world and news of this "secret" was bound to reach them, and reach them it did, not as "good news" but as "bad news," not as a message of love but all too often as a message of hate. In this way, for hundreds of years, generations grew up encountering Christ only as an "excuse" for their neighbors to despise or destroy them—which was, of course, not an encounter with Christ at all, rather with the devil, who often does his important work under the mask of piety. They lived in their tight little communities and the crucified Christ hung over them obscured by the devil's smoke. Here in these ghettos an intense and passionate life went on, all the more intense and passionate because so concentrated and driven in on itself, a life centered around the synagogue, the Torah, age-old traditions, customs, and folklore. Squalor, poverty, grief, suffering, insecurity, the everlastingly imminent menace of persecution by one's neighbors, were miraculously interpenetrated and infused with beauty, devotion, charm, and a strange kind of joy—one must surely use the word "miraculously" for one has only to look at the squalor, poverty, grief, suffering, and insecurity of

21. Is it too farfetched to compare Chagall's *White Crucifixion* with Velasquez's *Christ,* as seen by Unamuno in his poem *The Christ of Velasquez?*

22. Arthur A. Cohen, "The Encounter of Judaism and Christendom," *Cross Currents* (Spring 1951), pp. 91–92.

our modern slums to see that no such grace interpenetrates the life there. In all of Chagall's paintings, there is this singular quality of the Jewish ghetto.

Raïssa Maritain speaks of the "joy" of his paintings, of the peculiarly "Jewish" quality of this joy, which was the very air of the ghetto:

The tender, spiritual joy which pervades his work was born with him in Vitebsk, Russian Vitebsk, Jewish Vitebsk. It is therefore imbued with melancholy, pierced by the sting of nostalgia and of hard hope. Truly, Jewish joy resembles no other; it might be said that with roots struck deep into the realism of life, it draws from it, at the same time, the tragic sense of life's frailty and of death. The Jewish bride weeps under the nuptial canopy. The little Jew who dances does not lose the memory of his wretchedness; indeed, by dancing he mocks it, and he accepts it as his God-given lot. When he sings, it is sighing, for he is filled with the past sufferings of his people, and his soul is bathed with a prophetic intimation of unimaginable sorrows in store for them. Has God not foretold them? Has He not taken pains, as He has for no other people, to tell them, through Isaiah, through Jeremiah, and through the other great voices in the Bible, about the purifications His love reserves for them? Those Jews whose souls are not delivered up to the worldly world but are washed each day in the living water of Scripture—they know all this. They know it, the Jews of Chagall. Look at the faces of his musicians; like those of his beggars and his rabbis, their faces are eternally true, miraculously able to speak life's joy and, at the same time, to meet the tormentor and death.[23]

Gifted jesters and comedians came out of these ghettos, and the wittiest of story tellers, the famous Sholom Aleichem who in the little character of Tevyeh transmitted "Jewish joy" to the world.

Tevyeh, "a little, bearded Jew in a ragged capote," sits on the driver's seat of his clumsy cart. He "keeps his eyes half closed," for he has no inclination to look on the beauties of nature. "His stomach is empty, his heart is in his tattered boots"; the rouble a day he earns carting wood "will not buy a day's food for ten stomachs, one of them a horse's." And he talks to his horse:

"Pull, miserable monster! . . . Drag, wretched beast in the likeness of a horse! You're no better than I am! If it's your destiny to be Tevyeh's

23. Raïssa Maritain, *Chagall ou l'orage enchanté*, pp. 62–64.

horse, then suffer like Tevyeh, and learn like Tevyeh and his family to die of hunger seven times in the day and then go to bed supperless. Is it not written in the Holy Book that the same fate shall befall man and beast?"

But then Tevyeh takes back his argument:

"No!" he says. "It is not true. Here I am at least talking, while you are dumb and cannot ease your pain with words. My case is better than yours. For I am human, and a Jew, and I know what you do not know. I know that we have a great and good God in heaven. . . ."

In the midst of all this Tevyeh realizes that it is time to say the afternoon prayer; he steps down from the cart and begins to pray "when a demon takes hold of his horse, for without warning, without visible or comprehensible cause, the exhausted creature breaks into a wild and idiotic gallop, and Tevyeh, clinging to the reins, pants after it, sobbing breathlessly: 'Thou feedest all things in mercy, and keepest faith with the sleepers in the dust.' (Stop! Indecent creature! Let a Jew say his prayers, will you. . . .)"

And so Tevyeh prays, trying to hold onto his horse, but at the same time not permitting this to interfere with his prayers until "as suddenly and as imbecilically as it had set off on its wild gallop, the horse comes to a dead stop, and Tevyeh finishes his prayers standing still and facing east, the sweat pouring down his face and beard."

Sholom Aleichem describes the old cemeteries with their "tumbled and worn tombstones" where "a Jew—more frequently a Jewess—in the last extremity of poverty or sickness, would go or send someone to the grave of his parents with a message to be delivered direct to the Almighty," and where it was not uncommon to overhear a wife speaking to her dead husband thus:

"Mazel tov, my husband in the true world, congratulations and good luck! I'm marrying off our oldest daughter, our first one, but I haven't a rouble for her trousseau, and not the first kopeck for the instalment on the dowry. Where am I to get it, my husband? Where? Answer me!" [24]

In *Burning Lights* Bella Chagall pictures the beginning of the Sabbath as it was celebrated in her childhood home in Vitebsk. The child waits for the closing of the shop, the close of the working week:

24. Maurice Samuel, *The World of Sholom Aleichem* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), pp. 9, 12, 32, 33.

The last to leave the shop is mother. She tries all the doors once more to see that they are locked. Now I hear her pattering steps. Now she shuts the metal door of the rear shop. Now her dress rustles. Now her soft shoes slip into the dining room. In the doorway she halts for a moment: the white table with the silver candlesticks dazzles her eyes. At once she begins to hurry. She quickly washes her face and hands, puts on a clean lace collar that she always wears on this night, and approaches the candlesticks like quite a new mother. With a match in her hand she lights one candle after another. All the seven candles begin to quiver. The flames blaze into mother's face. As though an enchantment were falling upon her, she lowers her eyes. Slowly, three times in succession, she encircles the candles with both her arms; she seems to be taking them into her heart. And with the candles her weekday worries melt away. She blesses the candles. She whispers quiet benedictions through her fingers and they add heat to the flames. Mother's hands over the candles shine like the tablets of the decalogue over the holy ark.

I push closer to her. I want to get behind her blessing hands myself. I seek her face. I want to look into her eyes. They are concealed behind her spread-out fingers. I light my little candle by mother's candle. Like her, I raise my hands and through them as through a gate, I murmur into my little candle flame the words of benediction that I catch from my mother.[25]

These brief descriptions can give only a fragmentary picture of the life that was lived in the Jewish ghettos. Life in the ghetto ranged from Sholom Aleichem's old Hebrew teacher—"blind in one eye and short-sighted in the other," who wore "spectacles without lenses" and when asked why, answered triumphantly: "Well, it's better than nothing, isn't it?"—to the rapture of the small child devotedly helping his father search out all the leaven in preparation for Passover.[26] This whole range is preserved in its essence—which is that of a great shattered crystal whose broken fragments, sometimes ludicrous in shape, still give off vivid bursts of light—within the paintings of Marc Chagall.

This was the ghetto. This was where generations of Jews lived, over them the high mystery of the Passion, obscured by the devil's smoke

25. Bella Chagall, *Burning Lights* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1946), pp. 48–49.

26. See Irving Süssman, "A Seder with Tata," *The American Hebrew* (April 22, 1949), p. 4.

through which its grace yet obscurely penetrated. But none dared look up and see the crucified Christ there.

THE CLEARING OF THE CLOUD

NEVER in all those long years of the ghetto were the Jews as a people to encounter Him. But a strange thing was going on in its little houses, for over one hundred years, from the middle of the eighteenth into the late nineteenth century. In the middle of the eighteenth century a Jewish mystic arose, the Ba'al Shem, the founder of Hasidism. The Ba'al Shem and his disciples were poor and lowly, and they went among the poor and lowly, speaking of the continuous interaction between heaven and earth; teaching that even the smallest and the least was dear to his Creator; and opening their rite-bound hearts to the power of constant personal communion with the Lord God. Very much like the first Franciscans, the "little rabbis" of Hasidism reached right into the hearts of the poor and abysmally low, and pulled out exaltation. It was perhaps this century of hasidic prayer that dispersed the diabolical fog which had obscured Christ, for the power of fresh, innocent prayer drawn out of the deep wells of need, the power of that which flows between man and God when man trustingly puts even a black and grimy hand in God's, is beyond estimate. When man puts this soiled hand of his in God's, he does not know—how can he know? —what he is asking; but he *is* asking, and God answers, and when He answers fog and smoke melt away, the air is purified, and there stands the Truth.

The mystical "little rabbis" taught their "children" the freshness, the newness, the personal quality of prayer—it may have been such loving prayer that made some look up and see that the air above the ghettos had suddenly lost its obscurity. And there hanging over them, as He had been for hundreds of years, was Christ, crucified. He was there as He is always in the midst of suffering and pain and persecution. Did He not say that anything, good or evil, done to the least of His brethren is done to Him? Wherever men are busy killing, wounding, oppressing other men, there He is, and it is to Him that they are doing this. The diabolical fog had cleared; even the black smoke of Hitler's assembly-line cremations could not obscure the mystery of the Passion hanging over the villages. And so, in the *White Crucifixion,* Christ is

stretched "across the wasted world in a great space of ivory," in pure incandescence.

Chagall painted a Jewish Christ. It took more courage than mere painter's daring to exteriorize this concept. In his *Crucifixion in Yellow* his Christ wears the Jewish phylacteries and a great Torah is unrolled at His right side while under it a little angel holds a candle and blows the ram's horn—one has the feeling that the Jews will, one by one, look up and see Him, see who it is that hangs above them, see that it is He who holds up the Torah, who holds up their prayers. And then the Jewish diaspora will be ended—the little angel will blow the *shofar,* the ram's horn, while the little candle will send its mighty beam over earth and sky.

It is so that Christ is portrayed to the Jews by Chagall, forcibly, distinctively, as *their* Christ. The Spaniards have their Spanish Christ portrayed by El Greco and Velasquez, the Germans their German Christ portrayed by Matthias Grünewald; there have been French Christs and Italian Christs; Chinese Christs and Mexican Christs—for He is portrayed to every people in its image. As the Blessed Virgin spoke to Bernadette in the vernacular, so Jesus appears in the "vernacular." But it is from the Jews that "the Christ is according to the flesh" (Rom 9:5). And yet there has never been a representation of a Jewish Christ. Now there is: Chagall has painted the Jewish Christ, the Christ of the diaspora.

The Christ of the diaspora. "The world's an orphans' home,"[27] writes Marianne Moore. So it almost seems in our twentieth century, for the Jewish exile and suffering is nearly lost in the great exiles and sufferings of our time: when whole peoples are uprooted, whole communities set upon by their fellow-men; when weapons whose destructiveness seems almost to match God's creativeness are brandished over the face of the earth; and when many Christians, fallen into inertia and the sole quest for material well-being, are in flight from God. This is indeed the century of the "diaspora"—and it is to this century that Chagall speaks, pointing to the Crucified who hangs over the burning cities, above the atom bomb, whose smoky mushroom cloud cannot obscure Him, above the suffering world. Above this our lost

27. Marianne Moore, "In Distrust of Merits," *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1951), p. 137.

world, in a great space of ivory, Christ is extended, head slightly bowed, eyelids down, watching behind them. Of what art thou thinking, my crucified Christ? What art thou saying, O Christ of our wounds? "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12).

There is in Chagall's paintings the ladder, and the winged clock, the winged clock whose hands approach three—"The Bird of Time has but a little way to Fly—and Lo! the Bird is on the Wing."[28] The hands of the clock approach three, as if they said: "Now is the acceptable time, now the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2).

UNIQUE SELF-PORTRAIT

CHAGALL has painted a Jewish Christ, yet the Crucified on his canvases is not only the Christ of the Jews but the Christ of all, the Redeemer of every man. Has he painted Him as his own Deliverer too? A recent painting, *The Spirit of the Town* (1946), has for its background snow-covered Vitebsk, its houses in a peaceful row, smoke rising from its chimneys against the dark sky. A white horse draws a sleigh while his peasant driver whips him. In one corner is a candelabrum, while in another the mantle of the Torah floats majestically, crowned with two lions holding the tables of the commandments. In the center of the canvas is the artist, palette and brushes in his right hand. As in his *Self-Portrait with a Clock,* he stands before an easel on which is mounted a painting of Christ on the cross, one of Chagall's loving animals—is it a donkey, or a deer?—gazing up at Him. He has given himself two faces: one looking earnestly, eagerly, at Christ; the other waiting to meet the eyes of Bella, his wife, who had died the year before. Her spirit, moving through the left side of the picture, is close to him, but her face is turned away and seems buried in her arm. The artist's left hand is extended, palm upward, toward the crucified Christ. Is he seeking Christ's love for his beloved; does he tender her soul to Him? At the base of the picture, somewhat between Chagall and his wife, is a woman with a Madonna face, her crossed hands holding a rooster. She seems their support, their bond. Is she Mary, "mother of fair love and of hope" (Ecclus 24:24)? And what of the cock in her

28. *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám,* trans. Edward Fitzgerald (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1902), stanza 7.

loving arms? Perhaps the bird in its innocence felt that hers were the arms of all refuge and fled to her, as the loving little animal must have run from afar to be at the foot of the cross.[29]

Has Chagall painted Christ as his own Deliverer? In an even later picture, *The Crucified of the Bridge* (1951), the spiritual journey which the viewer of his paintings takes with Chagall seems to reach its climax. Not since the artist's early canvases, where lovers hand in hand float blissfully through space or rest contentedly in the hearts of flowers, do we find a more peaceful, a more tranquil painting. Color, mood, line, expression, and concept unite in a single response, as if in the artist's long and ardent dialogue with God, the answer had been given. The painting has the rich unity of a musical chord vibrating through the universe. One has to pause for a moment and think of some of the earlier works, to receive the full impact of this late, culminating Crucifixion.

In *Obsession* (1943), eleven years earlier, Chagall had painted a terrifying nightmare, a cry from the depths of the abyss: the horror of a world in which the cross is torn down, lies fallen on the ground. Here Chagall faces a Christ not standing over Vitebsk, not standing over the Jew, not standing over the world. There is no ladder in this picture. No ladder leading upward. There is no escape. To the left of the canvas, in a swirl of turbulent clouds, an anguished woman looks down upon the toppled cross. And below her, to the left of the fallen Crucified, hovering over Him, an old Jew holds upright a trinity of candles burning in a heavy candelabrum. But one candle of the

29. In the *Self-Portrait with a Clock,* the figure in bridal white—Bella, the beautiful one—has drawn very near the crucified Lord and is about to place a kiss on His cheek. Opposite her, by the head of Christ, there is again the mysterious rooster. Perhaps it should be borne in mind that there was among the Jews of eastern Europe a custom of offering, on the eve of the Day of Atonement, a cock as a kind of vicarious sacrifice, as a ransom—*kapparah.* This makes particularly pertinent an interpretation of Chagall's roosters proposed by Walter Frei. Throughout Chagall's work, he suggests, the cock is an expression of sacrifice. The cock is present in many of his earlier paintings which celebrate human love as the sign of the sacrifice that two people bring to their higher unity in love. In one of these paintings the lovers veil themselves in the rooster's tail, in another they ride on its back through the night. But even when they float through space, the world they traverse is and remains this world. Yet human love tends beyond itself. Though it is, of course, only an *image* of the love of God, it is an image of the love of *God.* It is to be expected, then, and it is deeply meaningful that the sacrificial bird, the rooster, should appear when Chagall paints Jesus Christ, in whom God's love for man is manifest in the flesh and is given even unto death. See "Zwischen Himmel und Erde," *Judaica,* VIII, 1 (March 1952), pp. 37–38.

trinity is canting over and there is a frightening impression that this one falling light will take the other two down with it and the world will be plunged into darkness. In the foreground, Chagall's rooster, his bird of peace, lies dying. Almost filling the center of the canvas is a burning house. A woman stands at the side of the house wringing her hands. In front of the flaming structure a dark horse, harnessed to a cart, stops, frozen with fear. A mother tries to urge the horse on. Her infant child weeps, agonized at the mother's fright. But the horse will not, cannot, move. No path of escape is open. The fallen Christ blocks the path. The path is blocked; there is no way out, no hope; for there can be no hope unless the cross stands upright—stands upright as it always stands when Chagall is painting his reality and not his nightmare.

Yet *Obsession* is more than an artist's nightmare, more than a man's terrible obsession that the Cross may be thrown down; it is the portrait of an agonized cry from the depths of an abyss: "Lord, I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mk 9:23). But in the background of this very picture, the answer is written, in such small letters that at first one barely sees it: a religious procession, a procession of faith, moves across a hill at the right of the canvas, moves forward strongly, banner aloft, down the hill toward the fallen cross; and the cupola of the church past which the faithful march bows in the direction of the procession, in the direction of Christ.

To turn from this painting to *The Crucified of the Bridge* is to turn from darkness to light, almost from damnation to deliverance. Upright, glowing with heavenly light, the Crucified so dominates the picture that His cruciform body is seen to be the sacred axis of the world. Though stretched on the cross, He does not seem to be hanging but to be standing, firmly, among mankind. Unlike the other Crucifixions, this one shows Christ's eyelids raised, His eyes wide open. The rooster is in the air, jubilant, singing. Above the bridge, which stretches across the lower background of the picture, a band of lemon gold rises into the darkening sky as the last light of day ascends and the evening's peace descends. On the bridge a pair of lovers stand in each other's arms. The fiddler, to the left of Christ, his hat placed squarely on his head, is calmly fiddling. The peddler, no longer persecuted, his pack on his back, a cane in his hand, is taking a quiet promenade. A Jew in the lower right foreground is carrying his Torah,

his head turned to look at the mother and child who are near the feet of Jesus, at the base of the picture. The mother's left hand is raised toward Christ. The child is sweetly asleep on her other arm. Even the donkey, its head seen in the lower right-hand corner, smiles as though "after life's fitful fever" it may now rest. Houses are righted again; the homeless, who in earlier paintings seemed helplessly adrift, are now—in what contrast to the boatload of suffering humanity depicted in *White Crucifixion!*—floating serenely to shore, to the shore on which stands the Crucified, the sacred axis of the world.

It is not just because of the stone bridge in the background that this painting is called "The Crucified of the Bridge": He bridges what was separate before, and the whole scene mirrors the reconciliation and harmony He wrought on the cross. Dramatically underlining the theme of reconciliation and harmony, the spirit of Bella Chagall, which in the painting *Spirit of the Town* is depicted with head turned away as the artist points to the Crucified, now is shown embracing the Saviour. Clad in a bridal veil, she prints a kiss on the thorned and haloed head of Christ. Her face is aglow, like a tinted rose. And on the other side of Christ, the right side, the artist himself is climbing the ladder. The ladder, solidly rooted, is anchored to the left arm of the cross itself, and Chagall, an awed expression on his luminous face, reaches upward for the next rung.

Chagall has said many things about his paintings. He has declared that "art is in some way a mission"; that it is "first of all a state of the soul"; that "books and pictures are not created only with colors and words, but also with a clean conscience. Only the pure heart and soul can lead us onto the road of pure and exalted creations." [30] He has objected to the words "literary," "fantasy," "symbolism," when these words have been used to "explain" his pictures. He shares his journey with the viewer, but of the viewer, too, something is required if he goes with Chagall on this road. Chagall will share what he sees, but he will not expound on what he sees. Pressed for explanations, he has said of his paintings: "I don't understand them at all. They are not literature. They are only pictorial arrangements of images that obsess me. . . . The theories which I would make up to explain myself and those which others elaborate in connection with my work are non-

30. Kloomok, *op. cit.*, pp. 106, 17, 105.

sense. . . . My paintings are my reason for existence, my life and that's all." [31]

The viewer is invited to look where Chagall looks. Chagall looks at Christ. And he has found the ladder leaning against the Cross. Will he climb it? Is he climbing it? He has portrayed himself looking at the Crucified. Surely there has never been such a self-portrait painted by a Jew.

31. Sweeney, *op. cit.*, p. 7. The paintings discussed in our present study are not the only ones Chagall has devoted to Christ crucified. There is, for instance, *The Angel* of 1945, in which a flaming spirit, and no less sun and moon, stand in awe before the Christ, through whom and unto whom all things were created (cf. Col 1:16), whose outstretched hands are sure to bring all things to peace. Is the angel beckoning those on earth to gather around the Son of Man? There is an earlier drawing of 1941, called simply *Crucifixion,* in which Christ mercifully reigns in a world of terror and unrest. His arms are spread out like wings, as if to call all who are burdened. A Jew in his gaberdine seems to have heard the call and moves close that he may hold Him in a shy but loving embrace. In *Crucifixion in Russia,* a water color of the same year, again houses burn, people are homeless. A ship is ready to take them to a new land and to freedom. But before they reach the ship, a gigantic Christ looks down on the exiles and under His loving eyes they are able to comfort one another. His arms are opened wide as if to make a roof over them. Will these arms be their roof forever? Again, there is *The Painter,* drawn in pencil and wash between 1940 and 1942. It shows a bare room—nothing but a window to let the light through; a floor to walk on; and an empty chair, perhaps the painter's waiting welcome for a companion. Chagall himself is seated in a meditative mood before an unfinished Crucifixion, as if he were reflecting that what a man needs are the simple necessities, love, and above all the mercy of God shining from the Cross. Who can doubt that Chagall's extraordinary persistence in painting the Crucified betrays the extraordinary significance of the Crucified in his life?